Review: Ian Taylor: Africa rising? BRICS - diversifying dependency

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Ian Taylor (2014), *Africa Rising?: BRICS – Diversifying Dependency*, Woodbridge, U.K. & Rochester, NY: James Currey, ISBN 9781847010964, 208 pp.

Ian Taylor tackles two hot topics in recent debates on Africa. One is the "Africa rising" trope, largely derived from recent growth records across a variety of African nations; the other is the engagement in Africa of the emerging economies – namely, Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC). As the two themes are clearly interrelated, it makes sense to treat them in a single monograph. In fact, the book's greatest value is its laying out of the extent to which the trends interrelate. Taylor shows how the growth in African economies has coincided with a boom in commodity prices over the past decade, which in turn can largely be attributed to growing resource hunger in China and, to a lesser degree, in India and Brazil. As the lack of diversification in African economies has intensified (127-129), the BRIC states – as trading partners – have not helped African economies in structural terms. Thus, Taylor argues that the BRIC states' efforts in Africa essentially reify the continent's historical dependence on resource extraction, which has resulted in the "jobless growth" of the past decade and deindustrialization (139-141), and which has – presumably – contributed to the further entrenchment of neopatrimonial modes of government within African regimes. Taylor's pessimistic claims are backed by helpful individual analyses of Brazil, Russia, India and China in Africa, in which he delineates their differences with regard to style, interest and strategy (South Africa, the "S" in "BRICS", is not regarded as an emerging economy by Taylor and is therefore not included in his analysis).

Yet, one wonders whether Taylor took the "noise" around a rising Africa a bit too seriously. After all, few commentators aside from investment gurus and consultant firms portray Africa in such a rosy light. Most prominently, *The Economist* made a U-turn in its headline assessment (from "a hopeless continent" in 2000 to a "hopeful" one in 2013), but the 2013 special report also recognized the elephant in the room: the fact that much of the recent growth resulted from a natural-resource bonanza. Independent economists have been cautious with regard to the "Africa rising" thesis, although government representatives, investment managers and the World Economic Forum, all quoted by Taylor, do not share their scepticism. The "rising Africa" trope was also partly a reaction to the Afro-pessimism of the 1990s and its postcolonial undertones.

Similarly, by exposing the fact that emerging economies are not proposing an "alternative economic paradigm" in Africa, Taylor chose a particularly weak straw man. Most academic commentators highlight the

BRIC states' ambiguous effects in Africa. At least in the Western sphere, there is a pronounced scepticism *vis-à-vis* the BRIC states and their intentions in Africa. China has long been struggling with its dismal reputation as a mere resource extractor unwilling to employ locals. In Mozambique, for instance, accusations of Chinese illegal logging and the view that Chinese-built infrastructure is of poor quality are more widespread than the belief that China or the other BRIC countries are at the vanguard of an alternative economic paradigm. More recently, investments in mining by the Brazilian company Vale aroused considerable protest from displaced locals, and projects by two Indian companies – Rites and Ircon, contracted to reconstruct a vital rail link between the port in Beira and landlocked coal mines – were delayed to the point that authorities cancelled their contracts in 2011. All of this happened against the backdrop of extensive investments in resource extraction from Brazil, India and South Africa (among others) and a public debate around the shortcomings of resource-based growth in terms of poverty alleviation and employment. Thus, the celebration of South–South solidarity as a panacea for African development seems to be confined to BRIC and IBSA statements.

Taylor's claim that BRIC states are merely diversifying African dependency is based on his description of the BRIC states as almost exclusively focused on resource extraction and as "rigidly doctrinaire" in both their "application of neoliberal policies" and the principle of non-interference in dealing with African governments. Their rhetoric notwithstanding, the impact of the emerging economies in Africa, according to Taylor, was structurally similar to that of the established powers. Taylor also writes that the BRIC states had nothing in common with each other beyond their rhetoric and significantly rising GDPs. These assertions are debatable at best: While relevant differences between emerging economies in Africa and their Northern competitors persist, the fact that African states remain relatively less powerful *vis-à-vis* both groups does not alter that. Consider, for instance, the prominent role played by the state both within BRIC countries and in their relations towards Africa, which is markedly different from the role the state generally plays in Western-style capitalism. The development bank that the BRIC states are envisioning and the effective coalition-building they have been undertaking amongst themselves in various global negotiations since the turn of the millennium are noteworthy, too. Moreover, aid from BRIC states has at least some characteristics that distinguish it from Western countries' modes of development cooperation. Taylor notes the export of medicine from India to Africa and successes in overcoming rigid patent laws upheld by Western countries in the fight against HIV/AIDS. These are pertinent differences, which brings me to other lines of argumentation I disagree with: Taylor's overly negative portrayal of emerging economies as partners in trade and aid along with his dismissal of *any* positive developments in the wake of Africa's recent growth records.

First, competition in trade bolsters the negotiating position held by African governments. Take, for instance, India's unilateral opening towards least developed countries, noted by Taylor. This is surely a positive step from an African perspective, as it precipitated the OECD countries' opening markets in some areas in order to remain competitive. More fundamentally, having a more diverse group of potential customers decreases the dependency inherent to resource-based economies, albeit insufficiently. And if we decry African states' lack of power and influence on the global stage, then the emergence of new and diverse partners willing to ally with African governments – out of whatever strategic interests – appears to be a rather favourable political development, as well. Take Brasília's two-faced identity manifested in the claim to global status, on the one hand, and its historical preference for multilateralism (42-43), on the other. In fact, Brazil is highly unlikely to achieve the kind of global status it seeks anytime soon. Thus, no matter what the rationale behind its approach to international politics is, middle-power characteristics are unlikely to dissipate (not least because of recent poor growth figures), and multilateralism is as deeply engrained into the foreign policy establishment as is the demand for global status. Thus, underscoring Brazil's desire to gain global-power status while belittling the characteristics of middle-power multilateralism when debating Brazil's relations with Africa is somewhat unfair.

Likewise, the increasing engagement of emerging economies in foreign aid, as Taylor notes, may have positive effects. OECD donors in many countries have harmonized their development policies since the Paris Declaration in 2005. New donors do not want to be part of these alliances. On the one hand, this undermines Western attempts to improve governance, democratic standards and the rule of law by conditionality (whose effectiveness is debatable). On the other hand, it gives African regimes a choice where they had (almost) none before. Moreover, Taylor does admit that "technology, advice and professional assistance from a country such as Brazil that already practises policies domestically in a developmental setting may be more useful to recipient countries' needs than that offered by the traditional donors" (51). Consider the hugely successful Brazilian social assistance scheme as a model for (much less developed) African countries. Yet, concrete examples with the potential to shed a more benign light on the presence of emerging economies in Africa, such as Brazilian aid towards democracy promotion in Guinea-Bissau, go unmentioned. Or consider Brazil's "ethanol diplomacy", which seeks to establish a global market for biofuels based on Brazilian technology. This, Taylor suggests, was exemplary of the replacement of one dependency (oil) with another (biofuels). The "ethanol diplomacy" is a fascinating aspect of Brasília's foreign policy, and its effects in Africa are surely noteworthy. Yet, Taylor fails to mention both potential benefits of the production of biofuels for developing countries and the fact that the high level of attention it enjoyed under President Lula da Silva has effectively come to an end as a result of an ailing domestic ethanol industry. Future research should look in more detail into the forms of cooperation between new donors and African states before dismissing such cooperation as a mere tool of power politics or as detrimental to Western aid efforts, or both.

Second, the "rising Africa" trope was essentially based on the claim that a middle class was emerging where there was none before, this claim sometimes being augmented by references to new technology such as mobile banking. Taylor questions these claims convincingly (24), yet one wonders whether there wasn't a kernel of truth in the argument that a larger (though comparatively small in a global context), more urbanized and better-educated middle class did make a difference in some African countries. Surely, the issue merits a more detailed treatment – by reference to either macro-indicators (health, education) or individual cases.

Third, the book deserved a more thorough edit. Some quotes are difficult to read and, in certain cases, quoted authors seem to contradict each other (for example, on the principles underlying Russian foreign policy, 64-68). In other instances, the text becomes somewhat declaratory when quotes are not backed by empirical information. For instance, Taylor quotes a source stating that support for Brazilian foreign policy was a *de facto* requirement for being granted assistance from Brasília (51). This is surely an important piece of information, yet no further explanation is given with regard to what kind of support Brasília asked for and in what instances such informal conditionality was applied. The same is true with regard to Indian conditionality and Taylor's critique that Brazilian businesses did not provide employment opportunities for locals (48). With fewer quotes and less repetition, Taylor would have had the space to include examples from some of those countries with particularly close relationships with BRIC states, which could have both backed his overall claim ("diversifying dependency") and increased our understanding of the actual differences among emerging economies and/or between BRIC states and the established powers.

■ Johannes Plagemann